Book Forum

IV

BOOK FORUM

Working with Veena Das's *Textures of the Ordinary: Anthropology after Wittgenstein*

Headlines, outrage, illness, and images of pyres in the middle of a neighborhood—such is the context of the pandemic raging in India in the summer of 2021 as we lay the last hand on this book forum on Veena Das's *Textures of the Ordinary, Anthropology after Wittgenstein* (Fordham University Press, 2020). Yet in so many ways an introduction of this sort runs counter to the insights that *Textures* holds for anthropology, as figures also from its title, namely "Textures of the Ordinary." In this book, Das teaches us how we can understand, describe, and conceptualize the ordinary as it is inhabited in particular forms of life. Spectacular events often shadow, quite literally, anthropological descriptions of the everyday, the politics and aesthetics of lives in which violence is no stranger. Kinship, anticipation, friendships, and ethics are braided with this violence and rather than looking at an imagined world outside of this, the attention can be turned inward.

How violence is seeded within instead of exterior to what we might think of as an ordinary is one of the fundamental insights of Das for anthropological engagement with violence and conflict, an insight that in *Textures* is made through a selection of ethnographic and literary examples. What *Textures,* however, also achieves is to invite the reader to acknowledge and ponder how every single one of these intricate ethnographic stories can only be understood, told, and analyzed anthropologically through Das's engagement of key thoughts from philosophy, not least the writing of Wittgenstein and how his work has been inherited by the late Stanley Cavell, as well as by Cora Diamond and Sandra Laugier.

In contrast to the anthropological assertion that our claim to knowledge is first and foremost ethnography, Das shows that there is no such thing as an ethnographic rendering of the real that is not always already marked by conceptual engagements, in alignment with her intricate argument about the kind of realism that is honed by such an approach (see also Das 2021). Critics might argue that this is too theoretical. The point being, though, that there is no ethnography without concepts and that ethnography is anchored in precisely this understanding of realism, where our concepts are, in the words of Andrew Brandel and Marco Motta, "in the grip of reality" (2021).

How might this approach be particularly well suited to anthropological studies in what Andrew Jefferson calls compromised circumstances, studies that often inform the articles we publish in *Advances in Research: Conflict and Society*? This is the question we gave four ethnographers working in what are arguably such contexts, namely Emilija Zabiliūtė, Marco Motta, Resto Cruz, and Andrew Jefferson whose thoughtful contributions are the core of this forum on *Textures*. Inviting these authors to share how being influenced by *Textures* marks their work, this forum testifies to how Das's insights allow them to think about the pressure of such circumstances and

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the forms of life that are staked by them. The texts furthermore reveal the kind of demands that face anthropology in order to be able to describe and convey what ordinary life might mean in such contexts.

The question is pertinent to me too. I write this introduction during a recent escalation of IDF (Israel Defense Forces) aggression in Gaza; headlines, images, and high-level diplomacy abound until it cools down and the conflict returns to a simmering not worth serious engagement neither in media nor global politics. Until next time. I recall a Skype call with a mentor during a research stay in Gaza back in 2005. This was just after Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip, where the relief among Gazans of the evacuated illegal settlements was accompanied by a looming sense that the occupation had not left. While discussing how to adjust methodology for our study on psychotherapy among ex-prisoners and their kin in Gaza, my mentor said to me, "Now I know what you are on about. I finally got around to reading Das's work," referring to the *Daedalus* article "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain" (Das 1996). "I understand what you have been trying to say and how you need a different vocabulary for it."

What my mentor reflected was my deep and lasting sense that the work of Das opens up different registers of the meaning of living with rather than after violence and acts of war. I have often been questioned on the value of working with anthropological approaches originating elsewhere than the ethnographic contexts in which I work, as if reality in either place could impossibly resonate; as if ultimate cultural difference was the only way to acknowledge the particularity of experience pertaining to any given form of life. Yet as Das argues in chapter 10 of *Textures*, concepts do not come pre-packaged, their genealogies are less neat than they intersect, sprawl, and crisscross contexts in which they have been used, and through that use, become what they are. To us as anthropologists as well as the people we work with, the philosophical thread at work in this approach is ordinary language philosophy as taken up by Das. What *Textures* lays out profoundly is a picture of how these thoughts are brought to bear in the anthropological approach that is Das.

What readers might have gleaned in her earlier writing is now brought together in *Textures* to astounding effect, showing us the meaning of words like "texture," "ordinary," "form of life," and "the private." Is *Textures* a theory book, might some readers ask, theory about violence? Das's work does not come to ethnography as if we knew already what it is about. *Textures* is as much about desire, kinship, attachment, and human-spiritual relations as it is about violence, which reflects how Das works as an anthropologist in the deep understanding that social phenomena only in hindsight separates out neatly as being "about" something. The richness of this approach to understanding forms of life and the particular ways it is staked transpires in every single one of the ethnographic examples that allow us to come close to these stakes. Yet what is important varies, as it does for the four ethnographers we have invited to write about how working with *Texture*s has allowed them to approach the lives offered to them through ethnography.

For Emilija Zabiliūtė, the particular pitch of ethics as it stands in *Textures* allowed her to think more carefully about the braiding of moralism and an ethics of care among ASHA healthcare activists among the urban poor in New Delhi, India. In Marco Motta's text he takes a major challenge of working with violence as an ethnographer, namely how to avoid descriptions of human life to become tinged with fascination, terror, and excitement. Instructively, Motta demonstrates how T*extures* offers the antithesis of that through its mode of engaging ethnography, in how it is written and conceptualized. How *Textures* compels us to look elsewhere than the more well represented anthropological paths, Cruz reflects on the way *Textures*, and Das's writing more generally, has allowed him to emphasize sibling relatedness as a vital part of his

work on social mobility in the Philippines and the UK. Lastly, pausing for a moment to register the feeling of loss as his colleague from Sierra Leone has passed away, Andrew Jefferson ponders how particular figures in our ethnographic work accompany us, also when we thought they had stopped doing so. He credits the work of *Textures* to be able to work with the presence of uncertainty and ambivalence that accompanies all ethnography but perhaps in a particular way when the seed of such ambivalence is violence.

In her response, Das offers thoughtful comments on the themes that are expressed within the individual pieces as well as across them, ending on a note on the unexpected forces at play in how texts come to matter and instruct us in our work as anthropologists. That *Textures* is one such text for Zabiliūtė, Cruz, Motta, and Jefferson is clearly expressed in these pages.

We hope you will learn from these different readings of *Textures*, taking time yourself to think about how the described phenomena have instructed your own sense of anthropology as a home for the work you do as well as which texts continue to invite our reading them in an attempt to understand the lives we try to describe. One thing *Textures* has made clear to me is the implication of Das's invitation to think of anthropology as a form of life. This form of life is with *Textures* one in which forms of life and human acts that to others are unthinkable because of the moral and intellectual pressure they present have a home in anthropology; they are neither outside nor other to them.

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Repairing the World: Ordinary Ethics and the Shadows of Moralism

In this review article on *Textures of the Ordinary*, I would like to touch upon the relationship between moralism and moral regimes and ethics taking shape in everyday life. One of the most powerful contributions of this particular theme, and the entire book, lies in how Veena Das brings readers' attention to subtleties and small acts that illuminate lives and stories of no minor significance and that pose questions fundamental to anthropology and philosophy alike. Writing about lives and worlds marked by fragility, she elucidates them with care and sensitivity, avoiding imposing epistemic violence where concepts are born by turning away from what is before the eyes of an observer (308). That itself constitutes a fulfilled aesthetics and ethics of anthropological practice. Some accounts intentionally end, and the reader is warned of the uncertainties and limits of anthropological investigation. As Das's form of inquiry and ethnography highlight, silence can be as revealing as words, and dwelling next to others can be more valuable than attempts to expose.

For Das, ethical life is a "dimension of everyday life or, even better, . . . a spirit that infuses everyday life" (98). This view departs from a Kantian ethics that takes ethical life to be carved out through reference to the objective and explicit rules, and as a separate sphere from everyday life. Henceforth, Das has together with Michael Lambek come to be seen as embodying the approach to ethics termed "Ordinary Ethics" originating from the volume of the same name, although

there are important differences within this approach too (Lambek 2010). Nonetheless, a perspective of ethics within this approach requires detailed attention to minute everyday gestures and detection of "human" acts as opposed to mechanical ones, and it also compels the ethnographer to ask how these ethically oriented habitual acts are relational, in other words, directed toward concrete others in specific situations. Here, bodily dispositions, language tweaks, moments of silence, or requests may reveal worlds of fractured or caring relationships, histories of violence, and attempts to rebuild lives and respectability. Consider the subtleties involved in a wealthier relative's attempt to financially support another relative: giving money is an act of care achieved by finding the right moment and way, so that it is not interpreted as wealth display. At the same time, the giver avoids drawing attention of extended kin to the acknowledgement that the relative needs support; and giving an impression that she is complaining (104). Attention to ordinary ethics thereby also reveals, as Das asserts, shaky ground, where worlds can easily go awry, where good intentions and small deeds may have unforeseen consequences, especially as stakes are high and lives are already fragile in the context of poverty, illnesses, relational and gendered injustices, and violence.

My ethnographic attention to such gestures was drawn when doing fieldwork with Community Health Activists (ASHAs) in Delhi, who worked for a governmental health program to improve access to healthcare, family planning, and maternal and child healthcare in urban poor neighborhoods (Zabiliūtė 2021). An important aspect of ASHA work is verbal acts of persuasion and motivation of their own neighbors toward various health behaviors. One reading of such activities would be to think of ASHAs as agents of moralism—a concern with others' morality, underscored by distribution of liabilities of care (Davis 2012). ASHAs' imparting of specific childcare and maternal health knowledge and heterosexual familial ideals then would constitute an example of moralism, which often underscores family planning, maternal and child healthcare programs, and has an entrenched normativity about what a "good" family should look like in many parts of the world. However, following ASHAs in their everyday lives, I noticed that there was also a different modality of ethics that guided them. Their work was underscored by attentiveness and cultivation of relational neighborly sensibilities, such as keeping a respectful distance from some neighbors in order to avoid quarrels, not interfering in another family's matters, or helping concrete others in specific situations. it involved the same kind of attention to the risk of failure as the example given by Das above.

But how does shedding light on minute acts of the ordinary allow for attending to subjectivities and ethical self-making in a world witnessing violent and exclusionary ideologies and institutions that deprive possibilities, inscribe violence, delineate exclusion in the name of "good" and dictate moral superiority? Does the power of explicit moral ideologies and moralisms serve as a more powerful reference point for ethical self-formation when compared to ordinary ethics? It seems there may be moments where ordinary ethics and moralisms or explicitly elucidated moral knowledge shape ethical selves in parallel, or there is traffic between them. The separation between these two forms of moral self-formation becomes obscure. This is visible in Das's discussion of a family's efforts to attune religiosities in the face of intra-religious marriage with precarious potential to disturb social worlds and lives.

I read Das's *Ordinary Ethics* not as negating other forms of ethical self-making or lessening the significance of moralism and moral regimes, but as an inquiry into efforts to achieve an ethical life, specifically with others in the world, where, as Das notes, social relationships are marked by unknowability. This contingency of relationships and ethical achievement asks for duration rather than finitude, openness rather than foreclosure,

and singularity, rather than generalization. Coming back to ASHAs, in parallel to the moralizing agendas of the health program, ordinary ethics infused ASHA work, which was also a labor of repair of those moralizing effects. In treating their neighbors as concrete others and being attentive to neighborly intimacy, they engaged in continuous efforts to achieve the good.

Das concurs that moral judgments and rules of conduct laid out by authoritative traditions are not absent in peoples' lives, but attending to them only would obscure overall moral lives (149). Moralism, then, is not absent. Indeed, I see that her interlocutors often find themselves in the shadows of it. This is the case for Sanjeev Gupta who, along with his neighbors, is called a thief for organizing a connection to electricity in his neighborhood. And this is visible when a family finds itself perplexed by an unexpected utterance of a dying family member asking to break customary death rites. These examples show how those living the most vulnerable lives live with consequences, violence, and conundrums moralisms bring. What *Textures of the Ordinary* teaches us is how ordinary ethics allows for repairing the world, returning to recognizable everyday life, and finding some comfort upon this return.

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The Text's Texture

Some years ago, in a workshop on concepts in anthropology and philosophy,[1] I presented a paper on the lingering violence that permeates everyday life in Haiti. At times, depending on the circumstances, the sense of pervasiveness of a particular threat takes the form, or is embodied in, the death-figure of the *zonbi*. I made it a particular point to avoid the thrill usually triggered by our imaginaries of such concerns. My paper was precisely about another approach to these concepts through which we would refrain from giving into the sort of arousal that would estrange us from a realistic account of very serious human matters. Yet, later in the discussion, I got carried away unexpectedly, despite myself, when I evoked the connivance between the police and the vodou practitioners. Their respective methods at some point converge when it comes to the settling of scores; illegal and occult attacks and state procedures absorb each other to a certain extent. I spoke of it with fervor, slightly entranced, thus captivating the audience's attention. This revealed already too much fascination and heat for Veena Das who, next to me, turned and said bluntly: "That's very interesting, but take away the excitement."

I am unsure whether I fully grasped the breadth of her remark at the time, but I feel confident enough today to say that one of the internal[2] teachings of *Textures of the Ordinary* is this: our excitement might lead us to miss, as both ethnographers and human beings, the details that matter in life. Worse, when excitement becomes fascination, it might prompt us to yield to the sort of turbulent thoughts that can make us leave the rough ground of reality to join the skies of metaphysics, as when one thinks of zombies as magical creatures or superstition, or the backrooms of insanity, as when, for instance, one feeds deadly rumors that cause violence to spiral out of control and turn into communal panic.[3] Ultimately, we risk giving way to hollowness, to thoughtless thinking, to just empty words. Veena Das

expresses her disquiet in the very first lines of her book: "I call my mode of reading Wittgenstein and Cavell a striving for an education, an apprenticeship, in part to show the work I did to quieten somewhat the fear of my thought becoming gaseous" (1).

In the beginning of her introduction, Veena Das invokes §109 of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* ([1953] 1986): "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language." If it is true that we are often subject to enthrallment, somehow despite ourselves because of our very ways of speaking, then it must be by way of language, too, that one forestalls the beguiling effects of language (which means, by way of the attitude and the practice that goes with it). Yet, this is not something that one does just because one wants to. Our goodwill has little to do with the problem at hand. And even if, at some point, one is able to de-escalate the flareup of one's excitement, there is no solution once and for all to the threat of an upsurge, for the fire smolders and never really dies out. Veena Das warns us all throughout her book: there are human problems that cannot be resolved, but we can temper our mood.

For instance, in chapter 8, Veena Das describes the adjudication of a case of an eight-year-old girl who "was abducted, forcibly restrained, tortured, and raped until she was rescued four months later under somewhat mysterious circumstances" (216). No one, I surmise, remains unruffled by their reading of this chapter. The atrocity of what happened to that girl is unspeakable.[4] And yet Veena Das endeavors to depict "the brutality and the cruelty that can surface at any time in these circumstances [i.e., in the shanty settlements of Noida in Delhi]" (216). But she cautions us immediately that, even though "we should ask what actually happens . . . matters are not as simple as that, for what happens is not so easy to decipher" (216–217). Nor is it easy to avoid being carried away by our emotions. How does one still allow oneself to be touched, marked, and changed by the violence one bears witness to, and nonetheless resist estheticizing it, thus distorting the ways it is lived by the people one meets in the field and rushing toward hasty conclusions? In some ways, the question of the perception of what happened and how facts can be twisted, details eclipsed, and thoughts disfigured is as much an issue in a tribunal as it is in anthropology. This is why, I suppose, the sort of violence Veena Das is concerned with in these chapters demands from her a certain calm and slowness.

She therefore responds to that kind of pressure by meticulously and dispassionately depicting the case to make the reader fully sense "the madness" not merely of the people but "of the milieu itself" (174). It is as if this texture of madness were all the more perceptible when the language used to describe it remains at a certain distance and at the same time recognizes itself as fragile (see xiii). The voice that carries that language appears to be constantly refraining from saying too much too precipitously, disclosing as it progresses its vulnerability to its own propensity for letting the words elude it. This is why Das says that she is "unable to come up with forceful, compelling conclusions" and describes her thought as proceeding "in crab-like movements, forward and sideways" (xiii).

This particular kind of cautiousness when it comes to writing about extreme violence reminds me of writers like Charlotte Delbo in *Auschwitz and After* ([1965–71] 1985) or Marguerite Duras in *The War: A Memoir* ([1985] 2008) who, in the aftermath of the Shoah, wrote somewhat plain and raw accounts. They avoided any form of enhancement or embellishment, thus preventing sensationalization. Interestingly, these texts have the effect of rendering a very sharp, subtle, and refined sense of what human beings do, are, and are capable of doing, including being inhuman.[5] Similarly, Veena Das carefully avoids excessively qualifying what she witnesses by adding layers of expression that may cover up what we do not understand or what we are afraid of. Hence, one important

question her book poses is: from where, and at what distance, does one write on conflict and violence?

Veena Das's deep concerns about the ethics of writing are nurtured by her reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell (whence comes the subtitle of her book). She takes up from the outset their perception of the human being as being entrapped in a readiness to fight, a preparedness for battle, in moments when our desire for assurance is bewildered. She sets this perception in resonance with anthropology's concerns with violence and suffering. If Cavell ([1979] 1999) is right to speak of us, humans, as restless and embattled creatures, ready to wage war against one another, then anthropology must be responsive to that constitutive aspect of our being human, and thus must also be answerable, not merely to others, but for them (although my answerability is not unlimited). Yet, a more insidious kind of violence is nested in our capacity for denial (of the violence, of the suffering of the other, of the other, of oneself, of denial itself). But if, not unlike philosophy, anthropology has the capacity to repudiate itself, it is because anthropology is spoken by human beings, it is voiced; and an essential feature of our language is precisely that it can deny or contest or combat itself. But interestingly, the vocabulary of war is not exactly that of Veena Das. She carefully avoids that sort of language when it comes to meditating on what our quest in anthropology might be.

One can detect instead hints of a desire for peace or, say, for an alleviation of the torment of thought at war with itself. In chapter 9, when she reports the dispute over the sacrificial ritual, she values the defenders of the Mīmāṃsā̃ school's reply because they oppose the excitement and the agitation of the other party not with an argument but with a tranquil assertion. "What they achieve," she writes, "is to restore calm to what otherwise would have become an argument" (251). Indeed, our reliance on and impulse to argumentation bears in itself not only a certain inclination toward polemics and verbal jousting, but also a propensity toward blindness. Thus, it happens that those who argue mark a distance between themselves, the world, and others and on some occasions may wound those with whom they argue. Hence there are moments and matters about which one will have to stop arguing. I take this also as one of the lessons one can draw from the book.

However, peace may have two sides, as she carefully writes in her preface (xii). The Sanskrit word *shāntam* (lit. peace) has luminous shades when it indicates "an end to turbulence, but in its darker shades it refers to death" (xii). Through the way she carefully arranges her examples and her commentaries, Veena Das makes us see connections that not only complicate the standardized pictures of "peace" (and thus of "violence"), but also have the effect of "taking away the excitement born of grammatical illusions" (10). Her whole book is presented as an "album" that portrays "household events." This "album" as a whole, expresses a deep desire to mitigate our fascination in the face of violence. The issue, as it were, is to try not to lose footing in reality when reality precisely seems to get out of hand.

Veena Das has a habit of saying or writing that she offers the listener or the reader a thought, an example, an interpretation, or a picture. She also perceives other thinkers as offering things: Michel Foucault "offers" a "description" (178); Robert Desjarlais a certain "idea" (Das 2007: 98); Cavell a "friendship" (Das 2007: 40); Wittgenstein an "image" (Das 2007: 62). Let me end by saying why I take Veena Das's whole book as an offering to the reader.

What strikes me in *Textures of the Ordinary*, perhaps more than in any other book she has written thus far, is how Veena Das operates a transfiguration of the conventional picture of what anthropology is. On one hand, she fully recognizes, of course, that anthropology is a mode of knowledge, an inquiry, and a method—did she not conduct rigorous household surveys and longitudinal studies in the slums of Delhi? On the other, however,

she also says it is something else: anthropology is, and should be, perhaps more importantly, about acknowledgement (and not only knowledge); about a quest (not only an inquiry); and about an unforeseeable path (not only a method). But her book makes one contemplate something, to my mind, still more important: anthropology is about love, the possibility of love in the midst of the ruins left by violence. And she says, beautifully, that her love for anthropology takes the form of a devotion to the world (16); I take this to be her offering to us, readers, an offering that has the power, in her own words, of a "therapy offered without drama whatsoever" (4).

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NOTES

1. A collection of essays ensued from this workshop, entitled *Living with Concepts: Anthropology in the Grip of Reality* (Brandel and Motta 2021).
2. I mean internal in the sense that it is at once a teaching we can draw from what she writes and from how she writes. The form of the text itself––its tonality, its grain, its hue, i.e., its texture––instructs us on how to read it, thus on how to receive her teaching.
3. See especially chapter 7, "In the Region of Rumor," of Veena Das's book *Life and Words* (2007). In *Textures of the Ordinary*, the relation between rumor and violence is notably developed in chapter 1 and 8.
4. This chapter is in keeping with the previous one (chapter 7) whose theme is our responsibility as human beings in the face of cruelty. Unlike chapter 7, which is based chiefly on Das's reading of two novels written by John Coetzee (1982, 2007), chapter 8 focuses on an actual case she has been following in Delhi.
5. Duras, and to some extent Delbo, were among those associated in the aftermath of World War II with the style called the Nouveau Roman. Roland Barthes (1967) coined the term *écriture blanche* (white writing) to characterize that style of writing that is only in appearance neutral and transparent, but that has actually an opacity that makes the rustle of language be heard beneath the surface of the plain words.

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The Residues of Kinship

Debris, detritus, waste: these are some of the words that might come to mind when thinking about "residue." In *Textures of the Ordinary*, Veena Das (2020) reminds us that within the scene of the everyday, residues can and do have lives of their own. Even in seemingly overdetermined situations, there are no guarantees on how such excesses and by-products might materialize, accumulate, or be received. What at first glance might appear to be mere excess or a repository of remainders could engender its own residues. Here, the everyday does not simply register

the effects of impulses that originate from elsewhere. Rather, it also produces its own surpluses, at times leading to subtle, as well as grand, shifts in how we relate to ourselves, each other, and the various worlds of which we form part. Yet, this generative capacity is accompanied by various threats: what is produced could be refused or stolen. The everyday itself entails acts, expressions, and gestures that could harm persons and their relationships and whose significance shift over, and in some cases can only be revealed in, time.

In inviting us to rethink (that is, to attend carefully and give justice to) the everyday and the ordinary, Das leads us back to the grounds of kinship. We see here how persons are embedded in relationships, with personhood itself contingent on these ties. What kinship entails in any given context is not pregiven, however. The relationships we inhabit entail manifold, even competing demands. Besides, relationships have multiple and shapeshifting registers. As with everyday life more generally, kinship is fragile and carries within itself the possibility of breakdown. Far from being a clearly demarcated aspect of everyday life, kinship is bound up with markets and corporations, states, religious traditions, courts of law, and clinics, among others. Ties of kinship bear the marks of these institutions, but also shape how they enter particular lifeworlds. Likewise, kinship—both that of anthropologists and of their interlocutors—forms part of the milieus that give birth to anthropological thought and concepts.

How then might we keep kinship's generativity and difficulty within the same view and what would it mean to do so? In considering these questions, one starting point that some anthropologists have taken is inheritance, including its implications for the economy and politics (e.g., Bear et al. 2015). *Textures* begins with inheritance too, although here it is linked to the question of how persons inhabit and build a life within a given culture. The child here is not a passive heir, but one who must piece together various bits and fragments of their cultural bequest in order to form their own voice. This process necessarily involves some distancing from—and even critique of—their parents and predecessors. Part of this process is "learning what it is to be with others" (33). But who might these others be? Here, I would like to focus on siblings, kin who have long been overshadowed in the anthropological canon by the focus on vertical ties and marriage.

The figure of the sibling makes its appearance in *Textures*, particularly when Das argues for the intrinsic potential for failure within the scene of kinship. She writes of "a common 'family drama'" that she encountered in her fieldwork, where the death of a father "incites a melancholic sense of the inevitable unfolding of a lethal conflict between brothers over property, succession, and even the right to propitiate ancestral deities" (142). Inheritance here is not only a vector of reproduction as certain regions of social theory suggest, but also a medium of enmity. She alludes to how the supposedly "pure" relationship between a brother and a sister could be corroded by greed, as well as the passage of time—a theme that is the stuff both of ordinary conversations in her field site as well as popular culture (126). The corrosion of ties of siblingship could take place over many years and even go unnoticed—concealed by the rhythms of everyday life, only to bubble up to the surface in the face of illness, death, or some other crisis. When the unraveling of ties comes to light, it could exert pressure on other characters in any given scene of domesticity, with the very survival of that scene dependent on the efforts of these persons to contain and mend rifts. Yet, even relationships between siblings that are suffused with love could falter, not the least because of the inherent limits to knowing ourselves and others. Equally, we depend on but also hurt one another.

The kind of siblingship that we glean in *Textures* arises from the specific milieu of Delhi and Das's intellectual and personal biography. However, it resonates with aspects of siblingship in island Southeast Asia and the wider Austronesian-speaking world, the

region with which I am most familiar. Siblingship is considered the paradigm of kinship in the region and takes precedence over marriage and filiation. Persons (including singletons) are seen as always already part of sibling sets. This emphasis on lateral ties of siblingship, in fact, goes hand in hand with the renowned flexibility and inclusiveness of kinship in this part of the world. Yet, as others have noted, the malleability and absorptivity of kinship here can be experienced as rather coercive; exclusion is part of the very fabric of relatedness; the warmth and closeness associated with siblingship during childhood could turn cold in later life (Carsten 1997; Lambek 2011; Strathern 1996).

Indeed, the picture of kinship that Das renders in *Textures* (and its predecessors and earlier incarnations) has been a tremendous source of inspiration in my own work on upward mobility in the central Philippines after World War II as told through the story of one family and their relatives and neighbors. Parents sought to bequeath their children with better life chances by taking advantage of the expansion of schooling and the professions (Cruz 2019). Children were expected to support each other's aspirations, at times having to defer their own ambitions in order to help siblings. Personal striving and desire for autonomy mattered, too—at times reinforcing, and at other times contradicting, middle-class dreams and expectations of solidarity. Dramatic shifts in the economy (including overseas work since the 1970s) have produced inequalities and enmities among siblings. Cousins in the succeeding generation thus live in the shadows of upward mobility, inheriting unequal life chances and enmities alike. In an episode that I examine elsewhere (Cruz 2020), two brothers and their young nephew sprung a surprise visit to their aunt, who had been estranged from their mother and her other siblings. This estrangement stretched back several decades, implicated a lattice of relations, and involved accusations of greed, envy, and ingratitude. Although the visit was partly meant to show that the brothers were not part of the conflict that had afflicted their elders (hence holding open the possibility of reconciliation), it was also seen as a thinly veiled attack on their aunt and her husband.

In contexts where siblingship, and kinship more generally, are freighted with layer upon layer of expectations and demands, as well as pain and disappointments, part of the challenge for ethnographers is to be attuned to the different registers in which interlocutors might speak or gesture. The significance attached to kinship could very well mean an attempt to conceal the difficulties that accompany it. It could also be the case that such difficulties can only be alluded to indirectly or in muted ways: betrayals and disappointments could occasion everyday kinds of poetry. Equally important is the passage of time and its ability to shed light on the meanings of seemingly insignificant moments and exchanges as these accumulate and shift over days and years. These challenges speak to the character of anthropological knowledge, but also the difficulty and vitality that lie at the heart of relatedness and everyday life. *Textures of the Ordinary* is a fine and generative example of how anthropologists might come to live with these challenges through a kind of thinking "that does not rest in flashing illuminations but almost begs for the cover of darkness within which thought can take shape" (xiii).

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Uncertain Relations with People, Practice, and Ethnographic Knowledge

When I was generously invited by Lotte Segal to participate in this book forum I initially thought to write about an affinity between Veena Das's *Textures of the Ordinary* (2020) and John Caputo's *In Search of Radical Theology* (2020). But as I reached the end of *Textures,* still searching for words and desperately clinging to slippery ideas even as they eluded my grasp, a scene from fieldwork kept intruding—unbidden, except perhaps by circumstance. I begin with this scene in the same spirit with which Das, in such powerful ways in *Textures*, revisits ethnographic scenes from the past and shows how life and words, the ordinary and the conceptual line each other in ways that matter significantly. The scene, not in any sense long forgotten but certainly not much present in my writing, concerns my (uncertain) relationship with a young Sierra Leonean named Flavour whom I got to know in 2006 when I was hanging out in Freetown's prison and one of its poorest neighborhoods.

First, a little background: the research I have conducted over the last couple of decades has focused on the relationship between confinement and subjectivity with a focus on the entangled relations between prisons and those who inhabit them (staff and prisoners) and those who seek to change them (often human rights actors). Inevitably, ethnographies of prisons (in West Africa and Southeast Asia) and my encounters in them and around them have drawn me toward thinking about how best to make sense of human life (and death) under circumstances compromised by poverty, conflict, and violence.

It is no accident that Flavour springs to mind when contemplating themes of grief, death, and the vulnerability of the everyday and of concepts, which are resounding themes of *Textures*. During a recent interview for the *Locked Up Living* podcast, my attention was drawn to a piece I wrote about Flavour just after he died. Shocked to learn of his death, I had penned and posted online a short text, a kind of tribute, a reflection on how the presence or threat of death had been an ordinary feature of his life that I too had come to know through our encounters (Jefferson 2016).

The intruding scene unfolded thus: we were in the city center quite late at night. I forget whether there was any special occasion involved; I think we were just socializing. A few months previous Flavour had been stabbed in the chest in a fight and the wound had taken time to heal; his shoulder was affected, and his breathing labored. On the street outside a bar where we had congregated, I fell into an argument with the driver of a vehicle who had parked in an unnecessarily erratic fashion in front of me. As the argument escalated, I became aware of Flavour intervening on my behalf, stepping in as if to defend me, as if to protect me. What I recall most strikingly was how wrong this seemed. He was injured, he was weak, I had invited the conflict, and I had no desire for him to get involved in another fight.

What is at stake in this scene that brings it so vividly to mind as I read *Textures of the Ordinary*? I suspect it might have something to do with the way a mutual ethics of care revealed itself, a theme I find compellingly present in *Textures*. There is also something about the ordinariness of the circumstances—

street, bar, *palaver*—tinged with vulnerability and laced with the risk of violence that captures what Flavour's ordinary life looked like. Why would Flavour put himself on the line for me? Why would I care so much that he did so? Today, this concern, this doubt about our relationship, also seems somehow connected to the nagging sense of loss I felt when I heard of his death.

When I read philosophy, I read it like poetry letting it wash over me and run through me, a bit like the way I do ethnography—hesitantly, innocuously, and hyperconscious of being out of place and at the mercy of forces beyond control. Reading philosophy and during fieldwork, I welcome this sometimes discomforting sense of lostness. To be frank, I am often lost in the density of Das's texts, lacking a solid grounding in either Ludwig Wittgenstein or Stanley Cavell. And yet her vocabulary (the words she uses, the lives she draws on, the encounters with people, and texts she deploys) has come to infuse my own attempts to make sense of the uncertain relations between people and worlds especially in what I have come to think of as "compromised circumstances" characterized by violence and vulnerability, exhaustion and foreboding. Flavour was tired and vulnerable that night in Freetown. The stabbing and his slow recovery had undoubtedly reminded him of his own mortality; it had certainly reminded me that a long life is not guaranteed for the young men and women occupying Freetown's poorest neighborhoods. Flavour's eventual death after illness was not in any way predicted by the events that night on the street but perhaps they somehow prefigured his death? In the final chapter of *Textures* ("The Life of Concepts: In the Vicinity of Dying"), Das carefully analyzes a book of poems that anthropologist Renato Rosaldo felt compelled to write in an involuntary gesture of grief fifteen years after his wife, Shelly, tragically fell into a river and drowned during fieldwork. When I claim that Flavour's ultimate death was prefigured by earlier qualities of his life I am drawing on the way Das poignantly writes about the traces of "menace" and "danger" present in Rosaldo's poetry when he describes events leading to his wife's death. What Das picks up from the poems is a sense of foreboding, a sense of menace, a sense of potentially lethal vulnerability that inheres in the circumstances somehow presaging Shelly's ultimate and untimely death. "The menace," Das tautly writes, "is realized tragically in the dead body of Shelly" (311).

To return now to where I wanted to begin, *Textures of the Ordinary* does have a distinct affinity with Caputo's *In Search of Radical Theology*, which happens to be the most recent book I read prior to *Textures*. Both books are a mixture of previously published works and new material and both take as a point of departure a sense of being lost. Both authors are grappling with ideas that have been the subject of their writing over many decades. And both are caught up in a struggle to make sense of fundamental matters of facticity. As a deconstructionist, philosopher of religion writing in the spirit of Jacques Derrida with often a glint in his eye, Caputo is perhaps not an obvious companion to Das given her desire to examine affliction and the real, but I suspect there is some value in allowing their respective oeuvres to "crisscross" (see *Textures*, chapter 10) and intersect each other. For Caputo, like Das, the contingent vulnerability of life is a given, perhaps the only given. Previous works such as *Radical Hermeneutics* (1986) and *Against Ethics* (1993) were early forays in his search for radical or "weak" theology and betray, in common with Das, a profound distrust of rules, formal definitions, propositional truth and an embrace of values such as hospitality and sanctuary offered as a response to an indistinct but insistent call to live and know otherwise. Caputo, like Das, exhibits to my mind an open-ended commitment to sense-making from below where the only concept he is really attached to is that of event, understood not as a happening but as what is happening in the happening. I am certain that were Das and Caputo to encounter one another they

would find much to disagree on. Anthropology after Wittgenstein and theo-poetics after Derrida are not necessarily an obvious match. But the poetic philosophy and the ordinary life prose of both has spoken powerfully and simultaneously to me, helping make sense of the worlds I study and the worlds I occupy as a researcher. Where Das draws us to the "always already" of the ordinary and the everyday (and the potentialities contained herein). Caputo points to the "not yet," the "is to come" that might be brought about by our adjacent dwelling together in the world and our engaged responsivity to the perplexities of strangers. Perhaps, maybe, uncertainly.

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The Moon Shadows
When Arguments Rest

In responding to the comments on *Textures of the Ordinary*, I find myself moved first of all by the beauty of the writing. Lotte Buch Segal frames the issues that the four commentators, Emilija Zabiliūtė, Marco Motta, Resto Cruz, and Andrew Jefferson, bring up in their respective contributions with stunning simplicity and sympathy. My thought is to take some of these issues in directions that were not in fact fully developed in *Textures* but form a kind of backstory of what kinds of thoughts hover in the background. Chapter 5 of *Textures* ends with: "At one point in *Endgame*, Clov says 'The end is terrific' to which Hamm responds: 'I prefer the middle.'" As Motta alludes to this feature of the text—the propensity to leave things in the middle—he recognizes my anxiety that I am "unable to come up with forceful, compelling conclusions," and the description of my thought as proceeding "in crab-like movements, forward and sideways." Yet the searing experiences of having to find ways to combat such things as government figures on people dead in the 1984 violence against the Sikhs or defense of jural warrant for torture put forward by learned jurists (see Das 2007, forthcoming) have left me with so many uncertainties about what exactly I want from my writing. Caught in battles that I cannot turn away from, I am still encouraged by the fact that Motta is able to detect the overall theme of *Textures* as that of giving philosophy and anthropology peace. This seems the right point at which I might turn to the issue of moralism that Emilija Zabiliūtė brings up in relation to ordinary ethics exemplified in *Textures*.

I must admit that though I have contrasted ordinary ethics with both normative ethics and virtue ethics, I have not given sufficient attention to explaining why moralism leaves me with unease. But let me first say what I understand by moralism. At the heart of this concept is the idea that moral thinking is about evaluating a person, an action, a character, by judgments about good and bad, right and wrong, duties, obligations, and this is why there is such an emphasis on making one's choices in terms of these evaluative criteria. Zabiliūtė is right that moralism stages judgments of others but there are two other features I consider important. First, that in moralist thinking there is no patience with seeing how an action develops, how the desires and passions are calibrated—when judging others, one is always standing apart as a judge. If there is such suspicion around

moralism and the self-righteousness of those who will sit on the seats of judgment at least among the communities I worked with and in my own understanding of the world, it is because of the aura of pride in moral goodness as if chance had nothing to do with the winding ways some of us end up in prisons or in self-loathing caused by the pressures to be moral. But the second point is that moralism in one understanding of Kant is also about the conscience standing in for divine judgment in which I experience the self as caught in a kind of courtroom drama of accusations, evidence, counter-evidence, and judgment. As Zabiliūtė perceptively notes, the ASHA workers she encountered in their daily life mouthed the instructional speech about family planning, and hygiene but in their day-to-day life they were very mindful of how to sustain neighborly relations, to keep a distance from situations that could develop into major conflicts. However, for me the main issue is not that somehow moralism can be combined with ordinary ethics; it is rather that if one major concern of those supporting moralism is the issue of responsibility, how does one take into account the way judgments function within ordinary ethics? And here I suspect there is a bigger divide between how we see the role of judgments.

Zabiliūtė is right that there are several moments in *Textures* when the question of judgment is at issue. I will just take up one of these moments to which Zabiliūtė is also drawn. But while she interprets this ethnographic moment as saying that the working of moralism is visible when a family finds itself perplexed by an unexpected utterance of a dying family member asking to break customary death rites, for me what is involved here is judgment of a different sort altogether. I try to show this difference by making a contrast between judgments offered from a third-person perspective (even when it is the courtroom of the self) and a judgment made from a second-person perspective. I loop back to the words in *Textures:* "The story of inhabiting life with others is of course not a straightforward one. It is possible that the voice of Sita from the deathbed was meant for her close circle of kin—one from whom she was asking for her hurts to be acknowledged—that in their collective wisdom they recognized that she was not seeking to make a public statement. She might have even counted on them to restrict the circulation of the words drawn out of her in anger or hurt" (137). Moralism, in my understanding, would not be able to distinguish between these two trajectories of the moral. I will leave for other occasions the fascinating issue of how to interpret the discourse of street-level health workers from within the life forms of the village or the urban slums in which they work and what attachments they have to the kinds of statements that can easily be taken to be moralist but are stitched to action through very different routes than that imagined by moralism. I loved the moment in Zabiliūtė's comment when she says that moralism poses a conundrum—there is a great opening here for me to think more clearly of the havoc that moralism causes in these lives.

Although Motta does not directly take up the issue of moralism, there is an exquisite rendering of what an anthropological mode of writing in the context of cruelty and brutality entails. I think Motta would take judgment not as made in a tribunal of sorting out the good from the bad, but in the form of aesthetic judgment around how to live and write in the circumstances as Jefferson puts it, "compromised by poverty, conflict, and violence." Motta draws from moments of his own writing and takes the task of *Textures* to show the path of finding expression. As he writes:

> How does one still allow oneself to be touched, marked, and changed by the violence one bears witness to, and nonetheless resist estheticizing it, thus distorting the ways it is lived by the people one meets in the field, and rushing towards hasty conclusions? In some ways, the question of the perception of what happened

> and how facts can be twisted, details eclipsed, and thoughts disfigured is as much an issue in a tribunal as it is in anthropology. This is why, I suppose, the sort of violence Veena Das is concerned with in these chapters demands from her a certain calm and slowness.

The themes of thought at war with itself, mirrors the theme of the anthropologist at war with herself, her own inability to let her own past die but I hope the striving for peace and a path to judgment that requires action without attachment to its fruits, as the Srimad Bhagvad Geeta teaches us is evident to Motta as to others. Motta ends with a beautiful thought about how he understands what anthropology might become.

> What strikes me in *Textures of the Ordinary*, perhaps more than in any other book she has written thus far, is how Veena Das operates a transfiguration of the conventional picture of what anthropology is. On one hand, she fully recognizes, of course, that anthropology is a mode of knowledge, an inquiry, and a method—did she not conduct rigorous household surveys and longitudinal studies in the slums of Delhi? On the other, however, she also says it is something else: anthropology is, and should be, perhaps more importantly, about acknowledgement . . . But her book makes one contemplate something, to my mind, still more important: anthropology is about love, the possibility of love in the midst of the ruins left by violence. And she says, beautifully, that her love for anthropology takes the form of a devotion to the world.

I might add here that the challenge is to somehow contain the desire for that magic that asks love to be something that could heal every wound all at once—to acknowledge the separateness of the other is hard enough, to do the work of making oneself intelligible requires a commitment to this relationship of devotion and to begin again and ever again as Wittgenstein's mode of writing taught us.

The wounds of kinship that I came to learn were an example of what I mean by attentiveness to the particularity of those I inhabit the world with. Cruz thinks of the idea of residues and perceptibly ties it with the way the everyday is made to appear in *Textures* where I wrote that the image of the everyday with which I make it appear as a concept also produces how I imagine the threats to the everyday. The everyday as Cruz says does not simply register the effects of impulses that originate from elsewhere—it also produces its own surpluses, at times leading to subtle, as well as grand, shifts in how we relate to ourselves, each other, and the various worlds of which we form a part. Yet the threats to the everyday might well be produced, he says, from seeds sown in the everyday. There is something striking and original in Cruz's nexus to move, which is to take not (say) marriage, or domesticity, as providing the image of the everyday but the relation among siblings that figure in *Textures* in crucial moments as Sita's unspoken lament against her brother or my own sense of devastation at failing grievously and drastically in not having been able to decipher the havoc in the life of my brother. Taking the braiding of love and enmity among siblings, a common enough experience of family dramas, Cruz turns our angle of vison from scenes of linear inheritance to how hard it is to divide what was once united. In his words, "Inheritance here is not only a vector of reproduction as certain regions of social theory suggest, but also a medium of enmity." This particular formulation of what I have called after Cavell "the scenes of inheritance" is stunning in its simplicity and the radical rethinking of kinship and reproduction it entails. On another register, we can also see how reproduction itself is a scene of both love and violence in the fact that those denied reproduction might

imagine it differently as Vaibhav Saria (2021) in his wonderful book on the hijras in rural Odisha shows; also, in the mythological stories where reproduction is not a simple matter of sameness and continuity in time but shows the corrosion of relationships.

Jefferson's evocative commentary is powerful in the way he shows that figures from our past, including those of people we knew and who we often feel we failed, have the power of coming back even if, and especially if, we (anthropologists) were not fully cognizant of them in our written texts. They are a bit like minor figures in a novel who disappear from the page but leave a mark on the story. There is a sentence in Jefferson's comment that I have wished for *Textures* to do for the reader. He writes of a street-level brawl he seems to have got involved in, and the way Flavour, a young man he came to know in the course of his work on prisons in Sierra Leone who later died, stepped in to help: "As the argument escalated, I became aware of Flavour intervening on my behalf, stepping in as if to defend me, as if to protect me. What I recall most strikingly was how wrong this seemed. He was injured, he was weak, I had invited the conflict, and I had no desire for him to get involved in another fight. What is at stake in this scene that brings it so vividly to mind as I read *Textures of the Ordinary*?"

The thoughts that this question evokes for Jefferson are drawn from his kind of past, his relationships, his way of being in his environment during his fieldwork but his comment brings out a very important ambition in writing *Textures* for me. There is no completely right or completely wrong way of reading *Textures,* even for me as I become a reader of the text. I hope it appeals to those who have a taste for the kinds of questions all the commentators here ask, but I wield no authority to define how to read it. I am myself not very well put together as a researcher or an author so each kind of puzzle evokes a different response, a different method of going about doing research, a different set of ethical questions. One responds to these pressures as best as one can.

Finally, I come full circle and respond to what my students and other readers close to me have had to conjure, sometimes to defend my mode of writing and at other times in response to certain idea of who is entitled to do philosophy? Starkly put, it takes the form of asking, why do *you* need Wittgenstein, why do you need Cavell? My response is that one does not choose who or what texts come to matter to one. Odd as this response might seem, I find in my reading of Wittgenstein striking ways in which his questions come to connect with what I read in Sanskrit and Prakrit grammar and poetry. Some of these connections surface in *Textures,* a feature of the text that Charles Hallisey and Michael Puett recognized immediately in a workshop on this book in 2018, but what could after Cruz be called the residues that should receive more sustained expression.

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